

Book One

SWORN
TO RAISE

The Courtlight Series

TERAH EDUN

PRAISE FOR THE COURTLIGHT SERIES

Sworn To Raise

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Chapter 1

Ciardis Vane watched the townspeople jeering as the local Gardis strapped the highwayman into the stocks. Frowning Ciardis wormed her way closer to the front of the crowd, straining to get a peek at the criminal. She felt no pity for the condemned man; he would die tonight, regardless of her feelings. The nightwolves were already pacing, their shadowed forms just visible in the dense tree line, waiting for darkness to fall.

Without the protection of the house wards, the highwayman would be defenseless locked in the stocks. *I wish I could say it will be a quick death*, she thought with clinical detachment, *but they'll probably go for his guts first*. The man deserved no less than death in any case; he had done nothing but steal from—and sometimes kill—those who traveled the Imperial coach roads. "Stand and deliver," indeed!

Ciardis pushed back her heavy brown curls with a sun-bronzed hand. Turning slightly to the side she whispered about his crime with the other washer maids who'd come to see the spectacle. Suddenly, she felt a sharp pinch on her wrist. Turning to see who had interrupted her entertainment, she looked over and frowned down at the younger woman who now stood by her side.

Wringing her hands anxiously, Margaret looked up at Ciardis and gave a quick jerk of her head to the side to indicate they should speak outside the crowd. "You'll want to hear this firsthand, Ciardis," Margaret said with urgency.

"All right, all right," Ciardis muttered as they made their way out of the crowd and down to the washer station with a few other girls trailing behind. The slight blonde woman who scurried next to her was a great source of village gossip, and Ciardis knew that whatever she had

to say would be worth leaving the spectacle in the midst of the judge's punishment. To Ciardis, a good piece of gossip was as welcome as spun gold...usually.

When they'd walked far enough from the crowds Margaret was quick to tell Ciardis the news that she'd heard from the weaver's daughter who'd heard it in the apothecary the day before.

Practically bursting with the pent up the news Mags bounced on the balls of her feet as she said, "Fervis and the caravan girl...they're *together* Ciardis."

"They're together?" Ciardis said with disgust, "No, he's with me."

Mags shook her whole head, curls bouncing every which way, in denial.

"They were *seen*, getting in a big fight and then..." said Mags.

"So?" interrupted Ciardis in disdain, "That means nothing."

Patiently the girl continued, ignoring the interruption, "And then the girl's father came and threatened to kill Fervis. One thing led to another and now they're bound."

This bit of news hit Ciardis with all the weight of a lead brick.

"Bound?" questioned Ciardis unsteadily. Bound was very different from *together*. Bound meant married, bound meant forever. Now *she* felt like throwing up.

"Yeah," said Mags softly, "I mean...I thought you'd want to know...first."

At this point Ciardis was staring off in the distance – hand pressed flat against her stomach as if by holding it she could keep her stomach from plummeting in despair.

Minutes later the town bell rang signaling that the highwayman had been sentenced and imprisoned. Everyone would be going back to work now.

Mind numb Ciardis trailed behind Mags, trying to comprehend how her life had just upended.

When she got back to the wash room Ciardis bent over the soapy tub, mind numb as her hands worked mechanically to scrub the red jerkin. Margaret knelt across from her, happily chattering away like a magpie. According to Mags, the miller's son had gotten some passing girl with child. The news had spread like wildfire after the fool had stumbled into the local apothecary's asking for honey's brew. Every woman in town knew that there was only one use for honey's brew, and it wasn't to sweeten tongues.

If the girl had been an orphan, like Ciardis, her swelling belly wouldn't have mattered much. She would have borne the brunt of the town's gossip for the winter months and gone home with a second mouth to feed after the snows melted. But the girl's father was the caravan driver for the only merchant willing to brave the fierce winds of Vaneis in the winter. He'd heard someone's tongue wagging and had confronted the girl before the honey's brew had passed her lips.

Frantic once he'd heard the truth from his daughter's lips, he had gone in search of Fervis Miller. Whatever words had passed between the caravan driver and Fervis over his daughter's 'condition' had been enough to get the message across. Fervis, bruises already darkening on his skin, had shakily gotten down on one knee before five witnesses and asked the girl for her hand in marriage.

The wedding was to take place on the dawn of the Sabbath – just three days hence.

Ciardis frowned contemplating going to their wedding – she would *have* to. Weddings were one of the few forms of entertainment in town, if she didn't go it would definitely take notice. She didn't care. Honestly, she didn't. If that idiot couldn't keep his stick in his pants, then he didn't deserve to wear her ring. Wringing out the last jerkin, she twisted it like she was wringing a stubborn turkey's neck. Or, better yet, Fervis Miller's.

She wiped her hands with a drying cloth, careful to prod Mags for more tidbits at the right intervals. She had finished washing the jerkins and Mags was done with the skirts she was scrubbing. They put them out to dry before the oven fires and then moved on to fold the huge stacks of tunics and pack them in the caravan trunks with dried sprigs of fresh mint. Ciardis thought about the stolen moments she'd had with the miller's son. In the summer, they'd picnicked in the meadows, and throughout mid-winter he'd held her waist as they flew across the ice of the secluded mountain ponds. Memories of the soft touches exchanged and the ardor in his voice when he'd promised that he'd petition for her vows were still imprinted upon her mind. He'd promised over and over that he'd convince his mother somehow that Ciardis, orphan girl with skin the color of pale pecans and unruly chestnut curls, was the young woman that should be her daughter-in-law.

Ha! Last spring, she and Fervis had even hatched a plan for her to bump into his mother as she left morning prayers at the church. They'd painstakingly played out the scene while laying on fresh hay in the cobbler's yard. When the day to bump into his mother had come Ciardis had tried to strike up a conversation. But from the moment the conversation began, it was clear from the rancor in the woman's tone and the disparaging look in her eyes that she considered her son's marriage prospects, far above the town's orphaned girl.

Guess she was right, Ciardis thought with irony, *He's going to get a caravan merchant's daughter who lifts her skirts for the first young man she sees instead.*

Frustrated and tired, Ciardis threw her basket of clothes down on the floor with such force that she startled Margaret right out of her monologue. "What's with you?" Mags asked, dark eyes wide.

"Nothing, nothing," muttered Ciardis. "There was a ground bug on the floor—just wanted to get it before it escaped."

Inside she was seething, calling Fervis every dirty name she knew. She'd wasted two whole years on that idiot. Two years of listening to his constant whining about grain prices and the boring bakery gossip in his uncle's shop.

She'd set her sights on him at age fifteen. He had been boring then, and he was boring now, but she could live with boring. What she *couldn't* live with were the pangs of hunger after an evening with no meals, a month without meat, or the backbreaking work of being a temporary field hand. With a man like Fervis, set with a steady income from being in a miller's family, Ciardis could have a life of leisure...or close to it. But now thanks to that lout she was ruined. Here she was, seventeen with no nest egg or dowry to buy a husband, and she'd already snubbed every boy within twenty miles to show Fervis her devotion. Her devotion, for crying out loud! Fat lot of good it did her now.

After finishing the last load of laundry, she eased out of the hot sauna room and into the outer chamber where Sarah, the dour head cleaner and accountant, kept the tally chips. The tally chips were small marks color coded for a task. A red chip for hard to clean garments like the red leather jerkins, a blue chip for folding a basket, a green chip for pressing and ironing. She counted hers as she walked down the hallway to Sarah's office. Today she'd washed three loads by hand and pressed and packed a further two. That was just enough to get her a decent tally at the end of two weeks' work. She had to pay the innkeeper soon.

Handing the chips over to Sarah, she waited impatiently in front of the scarred wooden desk. The woman took forever with anything, particularly when that anything involved money. She squeezed the last shilling out of every washing cloth and piece of soap she bought.

At last, Sarah handed over her payment and she went home. She even had a few extra coins, enough for a small bowl of soup with bread—*huzzah!* Since she could pay in cash she didn't have to worry about adding tonight's dinner to her tab, then. The innkeeper was a pleasant man, but he always charged interest to the month's tab when she did that.

She was freezing by the time she stepped into the warm inn kitchen, even though she was bundled in three layers, with woolen pants on under her skirts. Rushing to the fire, she warmed her chafed hands over the flames.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the only male waiter for the inn rush in through the swinging panel doors from the tavern. From the noise that wafted in behind Kelly the place was packed with journeymen. *Must be that caravan that's on its way out*, she thought as she nibbled on a cracker she'd filched from a side table on her way into the kitchen.

Kelly began to hurry out just as fast carrying a platter filled with hot mutton and an empty kettle which swung erratically from his hand. She ducked to dodge the errant kettle and said irritably, "Watch where you're going, Kelly, you big lout! You almost brained me." Ciardis pushed her scarf back off her silky mane as she straightened up, scowling.

"Sorry, lass," Kelly said, already rushing through the swinging panels and into the tavern. Noise flooded through the open doorway. *Must be a large crowd tonight*, Ciardis mused.

"Hey, lass!" said the rotund cook, "Good to see you." He leaned close, smelling heavily of savory spices, and said in a low voice, "Mind your way when you head back to your room, hear? Lots of knights about, and not all of 'em Gardis, if you catch my meaning."

She caught his meaning, all right. "Thanks for the warning," she said gravely. Grabbing two pieces of fresh baked bread and a bowl for soup, she had the tavern maid dish out the soup under the watchful eye of the cook. Paying for the meal she grabbed a spoon and left the kitchen.

She decided to take the back stairs with her lentil soup and bread. She navigated the creaky flight with her satchel digging into her back, balancing her plate in both hands. She ate as soon as she'd opened the door, ducked into the stuffy darkness of her room, and then eased down on the lumpy bed.

Ciardis went to sleep not long afterward, still furious about the miller's son, but a tiny twinge of self-doubt also fluttering in her belly.

At half past midnight, a sound broke through Ciardis's dreams and sent her lurching out of bed. She'd heard the light creak of the stairs outside her door. Frowning, she threw off the heavy covers and grabbed the knife she'd hidden between the mattress and wall. *Must be a drunken soldier.*

Her room was barely big enough to stand in, with a sloped ceiling and a mattress that took up most of the floor. If a soldier cornered her in here, there was no way she'd be able to fight back...except for the six inches of steel blade in her hand. Best to avoid the situation altogether. Thinking of her options she knew the roof washer was her only bet. It'd be tricky to maneuver to get up there while holding something but Ciardis quickly decided that she'd rather have the knife in her hand than in her belt. She quickly grabbed the rickety stool in the corner and pushed off the accumulated clothes to the floor. Standing on it with the knife in her right hand, she reached up and pushed at a panel in the ceiling, easing it up and placing it next to the opening. She gripped the edge of the ceiling with both hands and swung herself up and over, then slipped the panel back into place. Now she stood in the small crawl space between the room and the roof. It was insulated as well as it could be but the ceiling still leaked warmth in deep winter. Even with the leak, at times like this, she was glad she'd never gotten the panel fixed. It made her claustrophobic to think of being stuck in that little closet of a room with no fresh air.

Careful to move silently she grabbed the tarp that latched over a hole in the roof that had never been fixed and eased out the nails that held in place. Leaving the ceiling panel loose and tarp in place had numerous downsides...but in this case the advantage of escaping her room more than outweighed them.

As soon as she wiggled through the small opening, the bitterly cold wind chilled her to the bone, even though she was still dressed in layers. Her fingers began to feel numb. Trying to evade the chill she hastily rearranged the tarp and fisted her hands in order to pull back her trailing fingers as far as she could into her sleeves. Unfortunately that wasn't going to work for very long. She'd need to use her hands at some point.

It must be close to the freezing point, she thought while her teeth chattered. Her little room had a heat spell on it to ward off the worst of the cold, but out here she'd freeze to death if she wasn't careful. She couldn't hear anyone in the hallway now, but that meant nothing. Making a quick decision, she headed across the roof toward the stables. It wasn't the best place to sleep, but it was better than being raped, and Robe would look after her there.

The steep roof had peaks that rose up into the night sky and furrows that dipped sharply to help the accumulated snow slide off more quickly. That also meant there were a lot of snowdrifts at the wall base and, even worse, ice. She cursed under her breath as she struggled to maintain her footing. She saw the irony in escaping a drunken soldier only to bash her brains out on the ice below.

Upon reaching the roof's far edge, she carefully descended an ice-slick ladder to the walkway that connected the inn's second floor to the barn's upper level, where they kept the pegasus stalls. Hurrying now, she soon reached the welcome warmth of the stables. As soon as she stepped inside, the straw dust hit her allergy-sensitive nose and made her sneeze. Those

allergies, especially in the spring with the dust and dandruff, were a dangerous combination. Consequentially, at any time of year, but particularly in high pollen season, the stables represented her refuge of last resort.

Ignoring her discomfort for the moment, she headed for the opposite end of the row of stalls, where the stable manager's quarters lay. That was where Robe lived. He was a man twice her age, but with the mind of someone much younger. He loved animals, and they loved him. She shook her head silently, shivering. It was a simple-minded mentality but worked well for Robe and the stable owner. Garth had decided that a man with half the intellect of the others and a childlike enjoyment of the animals would be less likely to run off. He'd given Robe a home at the stables, steady meals and a few coins once a month for his services in training and caring for the pegasi. In Robe's eyes it was a good trade: his skills in the stable for a home. In Ciardis's view he'd been robbed of a proper income. But at the same time, she'd hate to think of what might happen to him on the streets.

Easing the door open, she sidled into the office area, which Robe used as his "pretty things" room. It was half-filled with rocks he'd picked up, shirts he refused to wear but loved to look at, and bright scraps of cloth pinned to the walls. Sometimes he kept colicky foals in here, too. Once he'd kept a baby snow leopard for a month—even built a nest for it. How Robe had managed to catch the dangerous creature, even a baby snow leopard had claws that rivaled the knife in her hand, and convinced the pegasi to keep his secret she would never know, but once Garth, the innkeeper, found out about the cub, all hell broke loose. It had taken some convincing, but Robe had handed the cub over to the innkeeper. Garth had told Robe he was sending it to a sanctuary, but really the innkeeper had sold it to a noble idiot who liked to keep dangerous pets.

Ciardis went over to the wall nook where Robe kept a couch. Carefully putting aside a pile of brightly colored shirts, she slid down onto the couch and curled up for an uneventful night's rest. She woke to find a bowl of cooling porridge on the floor near her dangling arm and pale sunlight shining down on her face from the narrow window. With a wry smile, she reached for the mashed mix of raisins, milk, and oats. She was pretty sure it was the same thing the pegasi ate. Only Robe would give this to a person and consider it a proper meal for a human.

After eating and visiting the bathhouse, she headed out for another day of drudgery at the washer station. Occasionally she would pull her arm over her head and the muscles along her shoulder to stretch her arm as she walked. When she arrived, she saw a lady with stylishly pale hair standing inside Sarah's office, arguing with the old washerwoman. Ciardis stopped in the hallway and listened to the conversation. The woman was shaking a knight's long coat in her hand. It was a beautifully vibrant red color – like the plumage of a dusk hen in spring. Ciardis also knew it was soft as butter because she'd handled ten jerkins of similar make yesterday afternoon. Listening to the conversation she heard the woman demand, "What will it take? Twenty shillings? Forty?"

What will what take? Ciardis wondered with wide eyes. Whatever it was, this woman was offering two months' salary for it.

Sarah shook her head slowly. "No. Ya can't have my recipe."

Recipe? What are they talking about? Realizing what it would look like if they caught her loitering in the hall, she contrived to look busy by shifting around and sorting the piles of clothes stacked against the far wall. Mags appeared out of nowhere with a curious look on her face, but Ciardis quickly waved her away from the pile of clothes she was sorting. She didn't want to finish before the conversation in Sarah's office was over. Mags walked away in a huff.

"Really, woman," came the exasperated lady's reply from Sarah's office. "I just need it for the red costumes. Is it really so costly for you?"

Furiously thinking, the pieces to the puzzle clicked together for Ciardis. *Red was a princely dye*, one of the few that took skill to harvest and prepare. Ciardis was known across the Vale for her red dye which she made from a combination of mountain plants and one elusive ingredient that Sarah had been trying to drag out of her for years. Ciardis refused to give up her secret ingredient, Mountain Moon Leaf, and Sarah hadn't been able to devise a substitute. More than anything Sarah loved her money and she knew that as long as she had access to Ciardis's dye she could charge a hefty fee to individuals interested in getting their garments cleaned in a way that wouldn't harm the bright red fabrics, which was why Ciardis had been in charge of all the red jerkins yesterday.

Sarah had warned her not to let the colors run, but quite frankly, she knew Ciardis's cleaning mixtures were the best. Sarah was just lucky that Ciardis couldn't venture out into her own laundry business; the Vale customer base wasn't big enough for more than one.

"That old harpy," Ciardis muttered after listening to the conversation. Sarah was trying to sell *her* dye for quite a bit of money and Ciardis was quite sure Sarah had no intention of sharing in the profits either.

As the pale-haired lady stalked out, Ciardis hurried out the side door and around to the front of the building to catch up with her. "Ma'am! Ma'am!" called Ciardis. When the lady stopped, she rushed up to her and blurted, "If it's the mix for the red you want, I can sell it to you."

"My, what a pretty thing you are," said the lady as she eyed the girl. She reached forward to touch the loose strands of hair that had escaped from Ciardis's bun. She looked curiously at the

girl's bronze skin and almond-shaped golden eyes. "How...unique," she said. "Now, what was it you were saying?"

"The mix," said Ciardis softly. "The soap mix, ma'am. It's *my* recipe." She raised her chin firmly and said, "It's yours for thirty-five shillings."

The lady's dark brown eyes flashed in amusement as they met Ciardis's golden ones. Ciardis grimaced, but held her ground, the woman probably knew Ciardis couldn't make more than fifteen shillings in a month, twenty if she were lucky. "Well," the lady said slowly, "I suppose I could agree to that. Bring the mix to my room this evening. I'm staying at the Green Inn."

Nodding, Ciardis backed away respectfully. She was already late for her day's work. Whirling around she ran down the hallway to the back of the building to the washer station to start her tasks. She'd been lucky that Sarah hadn't come outside while they were talking.

Hours later while fixing the lye for the next morning's batches, she overheard a bunch of the other girls talking about the mysterious guest from the South. Ciardis carried the large wooden tub filled with the ingredients for the lye outside. Mixing it there was always preferable, even in the cold. The stench would have been horrible in the little mixing room.

Lugging it outside she went to the area just behind the steam room filled with charcoal burners. Setting the heavy tub down with a heavy *thud*, she reached for the solution strapped to her in a round gourd. As she stirred it in a clockwise motion the voices drifted over.

Their conversation was just high enough for Ciardis to overhear from the other side of the steam room while the wall between them hid her from view.

"Did you see her?" one said in an excited whisper that Ciardis thought was Marianne, the candle maker's daughter.

“She has to be a—” said another voice, but Ciardis couldn’t hear the last word.

Has to be a what? She pushed her ear against the wall in frustration, trying to catch as much of the conversation as possible.

A third girl, Rosie, squealed, “Oh my lord. It’s not possible. Why would one of *those* people come here? It’s unheard of for them to come so far out—we’re practically in the middle of nowhere, and at the very edge of the Algardis Empire.”

“Who knows,” sniffed Marianne with disdain, “But *I* won’t be having anything to do with her. You know what they say: anything goes in Sandrin. I mean, those type of people are abominations. Companions – they’re nothing but women with loose morals.”

“Of course; I wouldn’t either,” Rosie stammered. “I just meant that it’s exciting to see one so far from Court.”

The second voice chimed in derisively, but Ciardis couldn’t make out the words. Ciardis recognized the voice as belonging to Amanda. After a moment, the girls rounded the corner and saw Ciardis bent over the mixing basin. When Amanda saw Ciardis, she raised an eyebrow and quickly shushed her companions, “Hush, both of you.”

The three town girls gave Ciardis ice-cold smiles, polite but distant while their eyes flitted over her faded dress, which had large spots where the color had faded away.

She returned their greeting and turned away, knowing that they had nothing to share with her. Even though she put on a brave face, she was wishing all the while that she had the courage to ask about the strange woman in their small vale. She wondered who the woman was, where she was from – could it really be Sandrin, and why she was here in Vaneis.

That evening, Ciardis gathered her last pound of precious mix for cleaning red dyed cloth and leathers. Carefully weighing it she put it on a small scale and used a stone weight as a

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